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# ISRAEL AND THE ARAB REFUGEES

A Survey of the Problem  
And Its Solution

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1. *The Future of Israel*: Address by Ambassador Eliahu Elath, delivered before the Economic Club of Detroit, Michigan, February 28, 1949.—Price 10 cents.
2. *Israel: The Tasks Ahead*: Text of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's Statement before the Constituent Assembly of the State of Israel, delivered at Tel Aviv on March 8, 1949.—Price 10 cents.
3. *Israel and the United Nations*: Address by Dr. Chaim Weizmann, President of Israel, delivered at a dinner sponsored by the American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science, New York, April 23, 1949.—Price 10 cents.
4. *Israel: The Case for Admission to the United Nations*. An address by Aubrey S. Eban, Representative of Israel, delivered before the Ad Hoc Political Committee of the United Nations, Lake Success, New York, May 5, 1949. Price 25 cents.
5. *Israel and Jerusalem*: Excerpts from an address by Aubrey S. Eban, Representative of Israel at the United Nations, delivered before the United Nations General Assembly on September 26, 1949.—Price 10 cents.

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# ISRAEL AND THE ARAB REFUGEES

## A Survey of the Problem And Its Solution



BINDERY

JUL 28 1970

# I

## ISRAEL'S OFFER

**W**AR AND REFUGEES are cause and effect. Time and again during the past decade the world has witnessed the same tragic scene—pitiful caravans of human beings, women and children, the sick and aged, abandoning hearth and home before the terrors of war.

The second world war left in its wake millions of destitute displaced persons, many of them Jews, remnants of the most barbarous persecutions which had been unleashed upon the world by Hitler. The end of the war found the survivors of the gas-chambers huddled in concentration camps. For many months after the war they lingered on in places that had become symbols of human shame and degradation. Now, thanks to international relief on a large scale, most of these refugees from Nazi tyranny have at last been rehabilitated and resettled.

Among the countries which have offered new homes to these hapless human beings, the small State of Israel, the youngest member of the international community, has taken by far the greatest share. Willingly, even enthusiastically, it has accepted during the first sixteen months of its existence the burden of adding 320,000 new immigrants to its original population of less than 700,000 Jews.

But those who had hoped that with the end of the war the curtain would fall on the last act of the refugee drama were cruelly disappointed. Every following upheaval created its own new refugee problem. The violent racial disturbances accompanying the partition of India uprooted eleven million Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems and thrust them destitute to the other side of the frontier. The civil war in Greece forced hundreds of thousands of villagers to flee into the interior of the country. How many millions have lost their homes in consequence of the civil war in China is unknown. Burma, Malaya, Indonesia—all added myriads to the stream of homeless wanderers.

It is in this perspective that the problem of the Arab refugees



must be studied. Their case is—unfortunately—only one of many, although for various reasons it has attracted public interest to a much higher degree than the fate of sufferers in other corners of the world.

### RESPONSIBILITY RESTS WITH AGGRESSORS

The Arab refugees are victims of their own war against the Jewish community in Palestine and of the aggression of seven Arab states against the new State of Israel. The responsibility for their present plight rests solely with those who waged this war of aggression in defiance of the expressed wish and decision of the United Nations.

But establishing the responsibility for the plight of the Arab refugees does not lessen its tragedy.\* Poorly clad and insufficiently fed by an international dole they spend their days in enforced idleness, for their Arab brethren, in whose midst they dwell and

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\* No reliable statistics exist as to the number of genuine Arab refugees from Israel, but a very simple calculation shows that they cannot far exceed half a million. It is evident that no more Arabs could flee from Palestine than were already there before the outbreak of the war. According to the figures published by the British Mandatory Government in 1946, the non-Jewish population in the areas now held by Israel amounted to 726,800. 170,000 Arabs now live within the borders of Israel. This leaves a maximum number of 556,800 refugees. But since statistics published by the British Administration appear, on the basis of recent statistical evidence, to have been about 6% too high, the true figure is probably about 520,000. In spite of this very simple and unassailable calculation, not only the Arabs—who habitually speak only in terms of millions—but also persons of international repute like Sir Raphael Cilento, of the I.R.O., and Mr. Hector MacNeill, British Minister of State, have put the figures of the Arab refugees between 750,000 and 810,000. Mr. W. D. St. Aubin, who served under the U. N. Mediator, goes so far as to place the figure at approximately one million.

These discrepancies can easily be explained by the fact that in addition to the *bona fide* refugees hundreds of thousands of the surrounding population registered as refugees in order to share in the benefits of international relief. In May the International Red Cross, which is responsible for the feeding and care of Arab refugees, urged the U. N. Palestine relief headquarters in Beirut to recognize a large part of the resident population in the sectors of Palestine held by the Arab Legion as "resident refugees"—some 100,000 persons in those areas were supposed to belong in this category. The Red Cross maintained that it was "becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate, as far as destitution was concerned, between the refugees and the residents . . .," and asked for a change in the U. N. relief regulations to include these "resident refugees" on the ground that "it would be senseless to force destitute Palestinians to abandon their homes to be able to get food as refugees." There is no doubt that destitute people must be helped wherever they are, but from the political viewpoint the term "resident refugees" is a striking *contradictio in adjecto*. Persons in that category cannot be included in the category of "refugees" who left Israel territory as the result of the war.

who are always so ready to accuse others of callousness, deny them the elementary human right to work. They live in an atmosphere of tension and unfriendliness, treated not as brothers in distress but as uninvited guests. Were it not for the generosity shown by the United Nations and its agencies, they would already have perished in their thousands of exhaustion, starvation and cold. Now they await with dread a second winter in the mud and cold of their inhospitable camps.

Jews need not be told what it means to be refugees. From humane considerations alone, Israel is most anxious to see the plight of these refugees relieved as quickly and completely as possible. As a loyal member of the U.N., Israel, like every other member, has the duty to assist in all cases of disaster anywhere in the world. Here, however, Israel has in addition a special interest in a speedy solution, since this problem forms one of the major stumbling-blocks to the establishment of stable conditions in the Middle East.

In the interests of all concerned, the problem of the Arab refugees must quickly be resolved. It is obvious that it cannot be resolved by relief alone even if the international community were willing and able—as it evidently is not—to extend its support and to increase it over an unlimited period of time.

### ISRAEL MAKES CONCRETE PROPOSALS

It has, therefore, been the consistent policy of the Government of Israel to contribute its maximum share to the alleviation and solution of the refugee problem. While it was bound, so long as the actual combat lasted, to refuse to undertake specific obligations, it has from the very beginning permitted individual Arabs to return on compassionate grounds. After the signing of the armistice agreements this practice was speeded up, with the result that the refugees re-admitted by Israel now amount to tens of thousands. Whereas the Arab minority numbered only 70,000 at the time of the first census taken in November 1948, it has now increased to 170,000.\* During the course of last summer, the Government of Israel made further constructive contributions. It agreed to re-unite Arab families separated by the war. It also

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\* This increase, however, is in part due to the incorporation in Israel territory, under the armistice treaty with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, of several large Arab villages.



affirmed at Lausanne that it accepted the principle of compensation being paid for lands abandoned by refugees and that it recognized the proprietary rights of individuals. It offered to unblock Arab accounts in Israel banks on a reciprocal basis.

Finally, the State of Israel has made its last and greatest offer towards the settlement of the refugee problem—it has declared its willingness to take back one hundred thousand Arabs, about 20% of the refugees, in the context of a peace settlement. The Arab population would then be approximately a quarter of a million, as against a million Jewish inhabitants, i.e., 20% of the total population.

The attitude of the Arab Governments, so eager to enlist the sympathy of enlightened world opinion for the harsh fate of the refugees while doing nothing to assist them, cannot be stated more clearly than in the words of the London *Economist*. This prominent weekly, which certainly cannot be accused of a pro-Zionist bias, wrote on August 7, 1948:

*"If the Arab society were anything but rotten, the Arab states would not be waiting for international charity to do something about their refugees. They might have even refused such help when offered. The Arab ruling minority have gone about this business in the same way they fought in Palestine, without public spirit or personal sacrifice or common effort. And now they dare not tell their people what happened. This is a problem for the Arabs today, a more real one than their immediate relations with the Zionist state. . . ."*

The chief contribution of the Arab countries towards a solution has been to reject every offer made by Israel, with shouts of "not enough," and to demand that the problem be solved by the return of the refugees to Israel alone. These clamorings from the authors of the tragedy might be ignored, were it not for the fact that they have received some support from quarters whose sincerity cannot be questioned. Even among those who after a thorough study of the basic elements of the problem have come to the conclusion that it cannot be solved by wholesale repatriation, Israel's offer to allow 100,000 refugees to return has not always been received in the spirit in which it was made.

But elemental events like the mass flight of a whole population cannot be undone simply by an attempted return to the *status quo*.

It must be obvious that the problem of the Arab refugees cannot be solved by repatriation alone. Nor can it be dealt with by humanitarian relief alone—it requires a statesmanlike approach to achieve a solution which will be stable and constructive. Responsible circles have therefore come to acknowledge that large-scale resettlement in Arab countries must play the major role in any final solution. The terms of reference of the U. N. Economic Survey Group under the distinguished chairmanship of Mr. Gordon R. Clapp prove that the Palestine Conciliation Committee, which has studied the situation more thoroughly than any other body, is thinking along such lines. The only question which must be answered concerns the relative share of repatriation and resettlement in the final solution of the problem. Should Israel accept one hundred thousand refugees? Should it accept a higher or lower figure?

The Government of Israel has stated on various occasions that as far as it is concerned this question has been given a definitive answer. It will not under any circumstances increase its offer beyond 100,000. This offer was not a bid in the market of human wreckage. It constitutes a final decision by a sovereign and independent Government, and takes into account the limits of Israel's capacity and the effect which this resettlement will have on the economy and security of the State. It was based on careful study and prolonged deliberation.



## II

### AFTERMATH OF THE WAR

THE FLIGHT of the Palestinian Arabs is a striking example of mass hysteria, induced by propaganda and the contagious spread of self-delusion. It cannot be compared with the flight of the panic-stricken masses in Belgium and France during the onslaught of the Nazi juggernaut, a flight which was systematically provoked by means of deliberate terrorization. It cannot be compared with the rush of refugees in India after an outbreak of mass violence and fearful slaughter. The unique feature of the Arab exodus is that it was on the whole a result of spontaneous action, motivated by emotions and fears which prevailed in the last days of British rule in Palestine, and which were exploited by the Arab leaders represented primarily by the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem and the Arab Higher Committee.

The greater part of the Arab refugees fled from their homes before the founding of the State of Israel and before it was invaded by the Arab armies. The Jews at that time were armed only with rifles and sten-guns. Britain was still ruling, so no major battles had taken place, and the number of casualties among the Arab population was relatively insignificant. Yet when the port of Haifa was captured in April 1948 by the Haganah, almost the entire Arab population voluntarily left it in obedience to an order of the Arab Higher Committee. Haifa was conquered by 200 armed men of the Haganah. The Arab population of Haifa was about 65,000, more than 320 times as numerous as its conquerors. There was absolutely no need for the Arab inhabitants of Haifa to leave their homes, and in fact the few thousands who preferred to stay have never had to regret their decision. They are now full citizens with equal rights in the State of Israel. Their economic situation, though not ideal, is certainly incomparably better than that of their former neighbors who are now lingering in tented refugee camps.

Yet the order to leave issued by the Arab Higher Committee obviously could not have been the *sole* cause of this exodus. A

population of 65,000 does not easily abandon homes, stores and property at the behest of someone in authority. The real cause of the flight must lie deeper. In order to understand it a few words must be said about the relations between Arabs and Jews in Palestine during the past 30 years.

### ARABS REMAIN HOSTILE

From the beginning of Zionist colonization the Jews strove to live in peace with their Arab neighbors. Innumerable efforts were made to come to an understanding; sometimes they succeeded on a local and personal level, but as a whole they failed lamentably. For reasons that cannot be examined here, the Arab population in general remained actively hostile to the Jewish community and showed its true feelings in a series of violent revolts which cost thousands of Jewish lives.

As long as the British ruled they managed to maintain an uneasy balance between the two communities. With their gradual withdrawal after the decision of the United Nations General Assembly on November 29, 1947, Arab violence broke out more fiercely than ever. Soon fighting flared up on a wide front. As the Arabs occupied strategic positions on every highway, Jewish territory quickly took on the appearance of small islands. Exposed settlements were isolated for months from their Jewish hinterland, and had to be supplied by air. The Jews would have been super-human if such a state of affairs had strengthened their neighborly feelings towards the Arabs. No less human than any other people, they felt bitterness and resentment, which were not mitigated by the methods that the Arabs adopted. Sniping from ambush, mining of roads, killing of stragglers, arson and plunder—these were the methods employed by the Arab population of Palestine.

### SEPARATION IS ONLY SOLUTION

Clearly, if the Jewish and Arab communities could not live together in peace, they could not live together at all. They were so closely intermingled and so interdependent that they either had to cooperate or to separate completely. This basic fact of the Palestinian situation was the reason for the partition plan, officially advocated for the first time by the Peel Commission as long ago as 1937, and which was finally adopted by the U. N. General



Assembly in November, 1947. In 1948 the Arabs, by their ignominious flight, set the seal of finality on a situation which they themselves had created. When in the spring of that year the underground defense army, Haganah, turned the tables and retaliated with vigorous counterattacks against the aggression of the Arab population, the Arabs simply left the field of battle and fled. Even in their flight they were drunk with the hope that they would soon return in the wake of the victorious Arab armies which would reconquer the country for them and expel the Jews. To their dismay that day never arrived; the march of history has proceeded in the opposite direction.

While the Palestinian Arabs were outside Israel's borders, the Jewish army entered its life-and-death struggle against the armies of seven invading Arab states, and at the same time the Jews of Palestine set up and consolidated their own state, the State of Israel. Mass immigration started almost immediately. While the Arab refugees idly waited for a miracle to undo what had occurred, miracles happened indeed in Israel, but miracles of a different kind. The face of the land was changed. The Arabs had fled from a mandated territory called Palestine. That territory no longer exists. Its place has been taken by a sovereign state called Israel, a state created by Jews, through their sacrifices, for Jews who wished to enter its gates. The Arab refugees, if they returned today, would find many of their villages destroyed by war, others settled by Jewish immigrants; they would find a great part of their orange groves withered through lack of cultivation, most of their fields unsown and neglected. To what should they return? Not only their homes, but the very country from which they fled has disappeared.

### III

#### ISRAEL'S NATIONAL CHARACTER

**F**ROM THE POINT of view of Israel, the reasons which prohibit the wholesale return of the Arab refugees may therefore be stated as follows:—

a. *Security.* The Arab population has proved its hostility to the Jews. It would be suicidal for Israel with its precarious geographical position to allow the return of a large and potentially hostile minority. Israel is bordered on the north, east and south by aggressive Arab states. The offer of the Israel Government to accept 100,000 refugees has met with severe criticism from all shades of Jewish public opinion, both from the Government ranks and the Opposition. This criticism is not capricious. History has taught Palestinian Jewry too bitter a lesson. And, most ironically, at the very moment when the Arab states are seeking to saddle Israel with the whole burden of the refugee problem, they are clamoring for a "second round" in the war against Israel. They have increased their arms budgets out of all proportion and are busily reorganizing their defeated armies. Their revengeful approach to the Palestinian problem was revealed recently at Lausanne, where in reply to a request made by the Palestine Conciliation Commission they laid claim to the greater part of Israel's territory and sought, in the words of one of their spokesmen, to reduce Israel "to the size of a small enclave around Tel Aviv."

In this state of affairs considerations of security must be uppermost in the mind of Israel. It cannot be expected to commit suicide in deference to the claims of the Arab aggressor states. It cannot create with its own hands a fifth column within its borders. Its offer to allow the return of 100,000 refugees shows an amount of political courage and generosity justifiable only by a firm belief in the vitality and strength of the Jewish people.

b. *Economics:* It has already been mentioned that the pattern of the economy which supported the Arab population in Israel no longer exists. Bringing them back would therefore not eliminate or even alleviate the problem of rehabilitation. A very large



amount of international capital, certainly not less—and perhaps even more—than that required for their resettlement in Arab countries, would be needed. But whereas their repatriation would make them a burden on Israel's economic system, already strained to the utmost by the need of building a state in time of war and absorbing an enormous immigration, their resettlement in the underpopulated Arab countries might be of inestimable benefit to both the settlers and the countries of settlement. Whereas Israel is already densely populated, Arab countries such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan cry out for additional labor. Their soil is fertile, but millions of acres lie uncultivated through lack of manpower. Their water resources are abundant, but vast territories remain arid for lack of irrigation.

c. *National Character of Israel.* As a result of the war and the flight of the Arabs, Israel has become a state with an ethnically almost homogenous population. Although the present Arab minority of 170,000 is living peacefully under the protection of the state and in full enjoyment of civil rights, which will certainly be guaranteed by the constitution, and although their economic situation is incomparably better than that of their brethren in the Arab countries, the main energies of Israel are being devoted to the implementation of the ideal which is the very *raison d'être* of the new state—the creation of a home for every Jew who is in need of it. Were it not for the inspiration of this great human ideal, the Jews in Palestine could never have shown the superhuman tenacity and devotion which have now brought such miraculous results.

The whole economic and social life of the state is therefore centered on the problem of absorbing immigrants. The culture of the state is Jewish, the government, administration, army and all its important institutions are almost exclusively Jewish. It would be folly to resurrect artificially a minority problem which has been almost eliminated by the war. Such a policy could only create dangerous internal tensions and saddle the new state with a set of problems which must gravely hamper its harmonious development. Nor would it bring blessings to the minority concerned. For, though the minorities policy of Israel is and will remain liberal and fair, the minorities have of necessity to make the same sacrifices as their fellow Jewish citizens for an idea which cannot possibly be their own.

The harmonious cooperation of different nations within the framework of one state has rarely been achieved. Switzerland is a remarkable case of such cooperation, but Israel also recalls the history of Czechoslovakia and its Sudetendeutsche from 1919 to 1939, and is not anxious to copy that example. The tendency among leading statesmen nowadays is to strive for ethnically homogenous commonwealths, which offer more internal stability and less danger to peace through the possible organization of fifth columns with the help of neighboring countries. There is no doubt that certain peoples can live together in harmony, but in the case of Israel the two peoples in question—Jews and Arabs—have no point of affinity; their language, religion, social and economic level are different, and there will be therefore hardly any common basis on which to build a fruitful life together. From the point of view of the Arab refugees there is every advantage to be gained from their living their own kind of life, an Arab life, in congenial society, speaking their own language and finding their own economic level without pressure from a more energetic and technically skilled people within the same borders.



## IV

### ARAB STATES' POTENTIALITY

THE RESETTLEMENT of the major part of the Arab refugees in the Arab states could be the first step towards an economic regeneration in the whole economy of the Middle East. It could begin the transformation of a backward and undeveloped region into a center of modern productivity. All the Arab countries, with the exception of Egypt, are underpopulated. All of them suffer from antiquated methods of production. All of them except Egypt have not even tapped their water resources, and all of them are hampered by lack of capital and "know-how." The resettlement within their borders of hundreds of thousands of their own countrymen, most of whom are experienced farmers, coupled with the influx of international capital and technical assistance, would immeasurably strengthen the economic fabric of the Arab countries.

All the arguments set out above which militate against the mass return of the refugees to Israel strongly recommend their settlement in Arab states.

a. *Political*: The refugees are Arabs, belonging to the same ethnic and linguistic group of people and practicing the same religions as the native population. Instead of constituting a foreign element of doubtful loyalty—as they would in Israel—they would be easily integrated as loyal citizens of their new homelands.

b. *Economic*: Whereas the return of the refugees to Israel would put an additional heavy burden on an economy which is already strained to the breaking-point by its own refugee problem, their resettlement in the Arab states would stimulate a stagnant economy.

c. *Cultural*: The Arab refugees fit into the cultural framework of the existing Arab states, and could easily be absorbed by the surrounding population.

Objective surveys have proved beyond doubt that space and opportunity exist in plenty throughout most of the Arab countries.

*Syria* is a typical example. The country has at present a pop-

ulation of 3.4 millions, mostly farmers and agricultural laborers. In an area of about 66,063 square miles, i.e., more than 6 times that of Mandated Palestine, lives a population less than double that of the latter. Industrial development is still on a very primitive level. Natural resources are hardly exploited and exports consist almost exclusively of agricultural products. The settlement of a sizable number of Arab refugees in Syria would introduce an active element which has acquired a much higher standard of living in Palestine. There is indeed a project to develop the large and under-cultivated Jezireh region, which with the necessary financial aid and technical advice from outside could absorb many thousands of new settlers.

The situation with regard to *Jordan* is similar. Its present population, in an area of 34,740 square miles, amounts to about 340,000, of whom only 190,000 are settled, the balance being nomads or semi-nomads (as against Mandated Palestine's area of 10,157 square miles, a great part of which is desert, with a population in 1946 of 1,910,000). The influx of new settlers would undoubtedly be followed by a considerable increase in the country's productive capacity, provided that settlement is effected in a planned manner under the supervision of experts. *Jordan's* economy, hitherto based entirely on extensive farming, could be improved by a system of mixed farming. Cattle-breeding and livestock raising would soon show considerable expansion, small and medium-sized industries could be set up. By a slow disappearance of the nomad way of life, by the introduction of proper health and education systems, the population would finally reach a sound economic level and a high degree of self-sufficiency.

Similarly, the settlement of Arab refugees in *Iraq* would increase its economic capacity. *Iraq's* population amounts to only 4.8 millions in an area of 116,000 square miles, i.e., two and a half times the population of Mandated Palestine in more than 10 times its area. An additional labor force is the prerequisite for the execution of long-overdue irrigation schemes. The unsatisfactory condition of its Government finances would eventually be improved. Settled in strict accordance with their agricultural professions, the refugees would increase the country's productive power almost immediately without requiring temporary subsidies.

It is worth noting that Israel has declared its readiness to cooperate in development schemes for the Arab countries. It has



had much experience in similar fields, and is therefore able to offer technical advice and assistance if required.

## CONCLUSION

Nobody doubts the vital role which the Middle East could play in world affairs if its tremendous resources were properly utilized for the benefit of mankind. Its importance has been recognized by its inclusion among the regions that are to benefit from President Truman's Point Four program for the development of backward areas.

With the exception of the small State of Israel, the potential wealth of the Middle East lies dormant, its treasures unexploited. Extreme poverty of the masses, illiteracy and sickness, are both the cause and result of this tragic state of affairs. Feudal rule, corrupt and inefficient administration, arrogant and fanatical nationalism have turned what was once one of the world's treasure-houses into a center of destitution, neglect and strife.

The Middle East today stands at the crossroads. One way leads to further conflict and aggravated misery. The other points to cooperation, higher standards of living and progress. That is the way which Israel offers. A program based on resettlement and development can open a new page in the history of this unhappy region. All the elements for improvement and progress are there; the time has arrived to activate them in the battle against stagnation and decay. Will wise statesmanship grasp this opportunity?